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SWP energy assistance program seeks to promote sustainability



Caleb Myers, Superior Watershed Partnership Energy Conservation Crew Leader, installs a roof-mounted solar panel array on a rooftop in Marquette County. The Superior Watershed Partnership's energy conservation and assistance program aims to help income-qualified households save energy and reduce their bills by providing education, home energy assessments, energy assistance and sustainable energy solutions, such as solar panels and weatherization measures. (Photo courtesy of SWP)

MARQUETTE — Energy sustainability and affordability are major issues in the Upper Peninsula, with many businesses, organizations, officials, utility companies and agencies coming together in efforts to address the issue.



One way sustainable and affordable energy practices are being pursued in the U.P. is through the Superior Watershed Partnership's energy conservation and assistance program.

This U.P.-wide program, funded in part by the Michigan Energy Assistance Program, or MEAP, provides resources such as solar panels, energy assessments, classes and energy assistance to households with low-to-moderate incomes, aiming to help them to conserve energy and lower their bills.

"We are trying to flip the paradigm around and empower all communities, not just the wealthy, to use renewable energy and be more self-sufficient and look towards localized power," said Emily Leach, program manager at the Superior Watershed Partnership.

Those who are approved for the MEAP program start off by taking a class, online or in person, which can provide education on budgeting, self-sufficiency, energy waste reduction and home weatherization measures.

Then, the SWP's Energy Conservation Crew pays a visit to a person's home and does a basic energy assessment, typically during the winter months.

The crew will provide further education and resources on how to conserve energy and lower the costs of heat and electric bills by speaking with clients about their energy usage habits and how they can alter them to reduce their household's energy consumption.

"They'll do a walkthrough with the client and then from there do basic weatherization measures," Leach said, noting crews will swap traditional light bulbs for LEDs, and install energy-conserving items such as door sweeps, pipe wraps, caulking and other in a person's home.

Weatherization measures and the switch to LEDs can help households save money on their bills, be more comfortable in the winter, and conserve energy usage, Leach said.

"Switching over to LEDs is huge, they are kind of pricey but once you switch over to them, it takes them years to die," she said. *"For example, we had a client on just the outskirts of Escanaba and they heat with electric and they have really high energy bills year round, and we switched them over to all LEDs and their bills were lowered by hundreds of dollars."*

Beyond these basic energy conservation measures, the program has also been providing selected income-qualified households with solar panels through MEAP and other funding partners, Leach said, emphasizing that *"solar is a viable option in the U.P."*

"The installations have been going well and we're definitely excited to do more," she said. *"And through the different funding sources, we are trying to spread them out with different utilities and across the U.P. so they're not all concentrated in the Marquette area."*

They've already done several solar panels installations through MEAP in the Upper Peninsula and plan to begin the next round of installations in the spring, with eight more installations funded through MEAP this fiscal year, and additional installations funded by the Upper Peninsula Power Co., the Charles Stuart Mott Foundation, United Way and the Community Foundation of Marquette County.

The ideal solar panel installation sites are homes with southern sun exposure and space for a solar panel frame in their yard, or a roof that is relatively new and in good condition so the panels can be roof-mounted, Leach said. Because of the specific site parameters needed, she encourages all interested and eligible parties to apply for the panels.

“We definitely want to keep getting people to apply. For those physical reasons, it’s hard to find really good sites,” Leach said.

For those who are interested in services the MEAP program, Leach said the income requirement is 150 percent of the poverty level or below. However, households with incomes of 200 percent or less of the poverty level are eligible for the energy assessments and solar panels through other funding sources, Leach said.

Renters are eligible for the MEAP assistance and non-MEAP home energy assessments, but must have signed approval from their landlord for the assessments and weatherization upgrades, she said.

Interested parties are encouraged to apply as soon as possible, as energy assessments will be conducted throughout the winter, and can visit the SWP’s Energy Office at Lakeview Arena in Marquette, call the office at 906-273-2742 or visit www.superiorwatersheds.org/energy-conservation for more information.

Leach also encourages those who are looking to lower their bills and conserve energy to find resources and incentives to do so by calling 211 or contacting local agencies such as St. Vincent de Paul.